

March 6, 2011

Madam Chair, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Dr. Linda Pelletier. I live in Union, teach at the University of Connecticut and freelance as a sign language interpreter. ASL is my native and first language as both my parents are Deaf.

I support the section of Raised Bill 6499, "An Act Concerning minor revisions to the education statutes" which would classify American Sign Language as a foreign (world) language as part of the program of instruction in our public schools.

Over the past 30 years, several factors have contributed to the growth and interest in learning American Sign Language. The most significant contribution has been the empirical research and linguistic study of ASL as a legitimate language. An additional interesting and unintended contributed to this growth originated with the introduction of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). Both are intended to integrate Deaf and hard of hearing students in regular classrooms with hearing students. However, this inclusion has also integrated ASL and Deaf culture into general education classrooms. After 30 years of institutionalizing the practice of mainstreaming, classes and programs in American Sign Language and Deaf culture in American public schools have grown.

Today, an increasing number of hearing students in public schools and institutions of higher education have taken up interest in learning ASL and Deaf culture. The University of Connecticut fully recognizes ASL as a foreign language and offers ASL as a foreign language graduation requirement option. The department of linguistics offers five levels of American Sign Language courses are offered including four Deaf related courses: Deaf culture, Multicultural Issues in Deafness, Deaf Women's Studies and Deaf Literature. Due to the high enrollment and growth in our ASL and Deaf culture courses, we have expanded our program to include courses in sign language interpreting training and education. The study of ASL and Deaf culture affords students the same challenges and rewards similar to traditional

foreign languages. Students learn about a language and culture that is different from their own and the opportunities, both personally and professionally, are comparable to those of traditional foreign languages.

It is sometimes argued, although to a much lesser extent, that ASL is not foreign because it is used here in the United States. The idea of "foreignness" has been re-conceptualized over the past few decades. In an increasingly global society, languages are becoming increasingly less foreign. English is, unquestionably a global language that is losing its foreignness. To question ASL's foreignness is to suggest world languages and native speakers of a language can only be studied and appreciated outside the United States? If this is true, then how can we explain or justify the study of Native American languages? And, does this suggest that Spanish students can only appreciate and learn Spanish in Spain or Mexico without consideration of the millions of Spanish speakers here in the United States?

One final and very important note I would like to make is that on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011, less than one month ago, both the Senate and the House in the State of Virginia voted overwhelmingly in favor of HB1435; the recognition of American Sign Language as a foreign language. Now that the bill has passed both houses (95-3 in the House and 34-6 in the Senate) it will be enrolled to go to Governor McDonnell for his signature. As stated in the Richmond Times, the Governor's office previously took "no position" on the bill so there is no reason to expect that he will not sign the bill. This will make Virginia the 35<sup>th</sup> State to honor this recognition. When signed into law by Governor McDonnell, the bill will make sign language courses more accessible by opening doors for all students, both Deaf and hearing. It is our hope Connecticut will follow the same trend as with the majority of States and become the 36<sup>th</sup> State to recognize American Sign Language as a world language.

Thank you.

Linda Pelletier, PhD, CI/CT, NAD5  
Professor and ASL/English Interpreter